

American Community Survey (ACS) Why We Ask: Language Spoken at Home

We ask questions about whether people speak a language other than English at home, what language they speak, and how well they speak English to create statistics about language. These statistics help the federal government understand how well people in each community speak English, and analyze and plan programs for adults and children who do not speak English well. Statistics about language spoken are also used to ensure that information about public health, law, regulations, voting, and safety is communicated in languages that community members understand.

14 a. Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

☐ Yes

☐ No → SKIP to question 15a

b. What is this language?

For example: Korean, Italian, Spanish, Vietnamese

c. How well does this person speak English?

☐ Very well

☐ Well

☐ Not well

☐ Not at all

The questions as they appear on the 2016 ACS paper questionnaire. This topic was introduced on the Decennial Census in 1890, and was transferred to the ACS when it replaced the Decennial Census long-form in 2005.

Examples of Federal Uses

- Required to identify vulnerable populations which may be at disproportionate risk of experiencing limitations in health care access, poor health quality, and suboptimal health outcomes.
- Required to report the housing needs of minorities, including non-native English speakers. State and Local government grantees receiving formula block grant funds from the Community Development Block Grants, HOME Investment Partnership Program, Emergency Solutions Grant and Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS programs, are required by law to report these needs.
- Required to enforce against discrimination in education, employment, voting, financial assistance, and housing, as failure to provide language assistance services to individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) could constitute national origin discrimination.
- Required in the enforcement responsibilities under the Voting Rights Act's bilingual requirements, to determine eligible voting populations for analysis and for presentation in federal litigation.
- Used to develop plans to meet the needs of older individuals, including the languages spoken by older people in the potential service population.

Examples of Other Uses

State and local agencies use these statistics to provide translation services and appropriate informational materials about voting, emergency planning, law enforcement, etc. in languages that residents understand. Public health officials use this information to determine whether there could be language or cultural barriers to obtaining health care. Libraries use this information to focus their collections. Advocacy groups use these statistics to measure demand, plan, and fund English language education and programs for children and adults.